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LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN.

LITERATURE is that quality in books which affords delight and nourishment to the soul. But this is a scientific and skeptical age, insomuch that one hardly ventures to take for granted that every reader will know what his soul is. It is not the intellect, though it gives the intellect light; nor the emotions, though they receive their warmth from it. It is the most catholic and constant element of human nature, yet it bears no direct part in the practical affairs of life; it does not struggle, it does not even suffer; but merely emerges or retires, glows or congeals, according to the company in which it finds itself. We might say that the soul is a name for man's innate sympathy with goodness and truth in the abstract; for no man can have a bad soul, though his heart may be evil, or his mind depraved, because the soul's access to the mind or heart has been so obstructed as to leave the moral consciousness cold and dark. The soul, in other words, is the only conservative and peacemaker; it affords the only unalterable ground upon which all men can always meet; it unselfishly identifies or unites us with our fellows, in contradistinction to the selfish intellect, which individualizes us and sets each man against every other. Doubtless, then, the soul is an amiable and desirable possession, and it would be a pity to deprive it of so much encouragement as may be compatible with due attention to the serious business of life. For there are moments, even in the most active careers, when it seems agreeable to forget competition, rivalry, jealousy; when it is a rest to think of oneself as a man rather than a person;—moments when time and place appear impertinent, and that most profitable which affords least palpable profit. At such seasons, a man looks inward, or, as the American poet puts it, he loafs and invites his soul, and then he is at a disadvantage if his soul, in consequence of too persistent

previous neglect, declines to respond to the invitation, and remains immured in that secret place which, as years pass by, becomes less and less accessible to so many of us.

When I say that literature nourishes the soul, I implicitly refuse the title of literature to anything in books that either directly or indirectly promotes any worldly or practical use. Of course, what is literature to one man may be anything but literature to another, or to the same man under different circumstances: Virgil to the schoolboy, for instance, is a very different thing from the Virgil of the scholar. But whatever you read with the design of improving yourself in some profession, or of acquiring information likely to be of advantage to you in any pursuit or contingency, or of enabling yourself to hold your own with other readers, or even of rendering yourself that enviable nondescript, a person of culture,— whatever, in short, is read with any assignable purpose whatever, is in so far not literature. The Bible may be literature to Mr. Matthew Arnold, because he reads it for fun; but to Luther, Calvin, or the pupils of a Sunday-school, it is essentially something else. Literature is the written communications of the soul of mankind with itself; it is liable to appear in the most unexpected places, and in the oddest company; it vanishes when we would grasp it, and appears when we look not for it. Chairs of literature are established in the great universities, and it is literature, no doubt, that the professor discourses; but it ceases to be literature before it reaches the students' ear; though, again, when the same students stumble across it in the recesses of their memory ten or twenty years later, it may have become literature once more. Finally, literature may, upon occasion, avail a man more than the most thorough technical information; but it will not be because it supplements or supplants that information, but because it has so tempered and exalted his general faculty that whatever he may do is done more clearly and comprehensively than might otherwise be the case.

Having thus, in some measure, considered what is literature and what the soul, let us note, further, that the literature proper to manhood is not proper to childhood, though the reverse is not — or, at least, never ought to be — true. In childhood, the soul and the mind act in harmony: the mind has not become preoccupied or sophisticated by so-called useful knowledge; it responds obediently to the soul's impulses and

intuitions. Children have no morality; they have not yet descended to the level where morality suggests itself to them. For morality is the outcome of spiritual pride, the most stubborn and insidious of all sins; the pride which prompts each of us to declare himself holier than his fellows, and to support that claim by parading his docility to the Decalogue. Docility to any set of rules, no matter of how Divine authority, so long as it is inspired by hope of future good or present advantage, is rather worse than useless: except our righteousness exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees,—that is, except it be spontaneous righteousness or morality, and, therefore, not morality, but unconscious goodness,—we shall in no wise have benefited either ourselves or others. Children, when left to themselves, artlessly and innocently act out the nature that is common to saint and sinner alike; they are selfish, angry, and foolish, because their state is human; and they are loving, truthful, and sincere, because their origin is divine. All that pleases or agrees with them is good; all that opposes or offends them is evil, and this, without any reference whatever to the moral code in vogue among their elders. But, on the other hand, children cannot be tempted as we are, because they suppose that everything is free and possible, and because they are as yet uncontaminated by the artificial cravings which the artificial prohibitions incident to our civilization create. Life is to them a constantly widening circle of things to be had and enjoyed; nor does it ever occur to them that their desires can conflict with those of others, or with the laws of the universe. They cannot consciously do wrong, nor understand that any one else can do so; untoward accidents may happen, but inanimate nature is just as liable to be objectionable in this respect as human beings: the stone that trips them up, the thorn that scratches them, the snow that makes their flesh tingle, is an object of their resentment in just the same kind and degree as are the men and women who thwart or injure them. But of duty — that dreary device to secure future reward by present suffering; of conscience — that fear of present good for the sake of future punishment; of remorse — that disavowal of past pleasure for fear of the sting in its tail; of ambition — that begrudging of all honorable results that are not effected by oneself; of these, and all similar politic and arbitrary masks of self-love and pusillanimity, these poor children know and suspect nothing. Yet their eyes are

much keener than ours, for they see through the surface of nature and perceive its symbolism; they see the living reality, of which nature is the veil, and are continually at fault because this veil is not, after all, the reality,— because it is fixed and unplastic. The "deep mind of dauntless infancy" is, in fact, the only revelation we have, except Divine revelation itself, of that pure and natural life of man which we dream of, and liken to Heaven; but we, nevertheless, in our penny-wise, pound-foolish way, insist upon regarding it as ignorance, and do our best, from the earliest possible moment, to disenchant and dispel it. We call the outrage education, understanding thereby the process of exterminating in the child the higher order of faculties and the intuitions, and substituting for them the external memory, timidity, self-esteem, and all that armament of petty weapons and defenses which may enable us to get the better of our fellow-creatures in this world, and receive the reward of our sagacity in the next. The success of our efforts is pitiably complete; for though the child, if fairly engaged in single combat, might make a formidable resistance against the infliction of "lessons," it cannot long withstand our crafty device of sending it to a place where it sees a score or a hundred of little victims like itself, all being driven to the same Siberia. The spirit of emulation is aroused, and lo! away they all scamper, each straining its utmost to reach the barren goal ahead of all competitors. So do we make the most ignoble passions of our children our allies in the unholy task of divesting them of their childhood. And yet, who is not aware that the best men the world has seen have been those who, throughout their lives, retained the aroma of childlike simplicity which they brought with them into existence? Learning — the acquisition of specific facts — is not wisdom; it is almost incompatible with wisdom; indeed, unless the mind be powerful enough not only to fuse its facts, but to vaporize them,— to sublimate them into an impalpable atmosphere,— they will stand in wisdom's way. Wisdom comes from the pondering and the application to life of certain truths quite above the sphere of facts, and of infinitely more moment and less complexity,— truths which are often found to be in accordance with the spiritual instinct called intuition, which children possess more fully than grown persons. The wisdom of our children would often astonish us, if we would only forbear the attempt to make them knowing, and

submissively accept instruction from them. Through all the imperfection of their inherited infirmity, we shall ever and anon be conscious of the radiance of a beautiful, unconscious intelligence, worth more than the smartness of schools and the cleverness of colleges. But no; we abhor the very notion of it, and generally succeed in extinguishing it long before the Three R's are done with.

And yet, by wisely directing the child's use of the first of the three, much of the ill effects of the trio and their offspring might be counteracted. If we believed—if the great mass of people known as the civilized world did actually and livingly believe—that there was really anything beyond or above the physical order of nature, our children's literature, wrongly so-called, would not be what it is. We believe what we can see and touch; we teach them to believe the same, and, not satisfied with that, we sedulously warn them not to believe anything else. The child, let us suppose, has heard from some unauthorized person that there are fairies—little magical creatures an inch high, up to all manner of delightful feats. He comprehends the whole matter at half a word, feels that he had known it already, and half thinks that he sees one or two on his way home. He runs up to his mother and tells her about it; and has she ever seen fairies? Alas! His mother tells him that the existence of such a being as a fairy is impossible. In old times, when the world was very ignorant and superstitious, they used to ascribe everything that happened to supernatural agency; even the trifling daily accidents of one's life, such as tumbling downstairs, or putting the right shoe on the left foot, were thought or fancied to be the work of some mysterious power; and since ignorant people are very apt to imagine they see what they believe [proceeds this mother] instead of only believing what they see; and since, furthermore, ignorance disposes to exaggeration and thus to untruth, these people ended by asserting that they saw fairies. "Now, my child," continues the parent, "it would grieve me to see you the victim of such folly. Do not read fairy stories. They are not true to life; they fill your mind with idle notions; they cannot form your understanding, or aid you to do your work in the world. If you should happen to fall in with such fables, be careful as you read to bear in mind that they are pure inventions—pretty, sometimes, perhaps, but essentially frivolous, if not immoral. You have, however,

thanks to the enlightened enterprise of writers and publishers, an endless assortment of juvenile books and periodicals which combine legitimate amusement with sound and trustworthy instruction. Here are stories about little children just like yourself, who talk and act just as you do, and to whom nothing supernatural or outlandish ever happens; and whose adventures, when you have read them, convey to you some salutary moral lesson. What more can you want? Yes, very likely 'Grimm's Tales' and 'The Arabian Nights' may seem more attractive; but in this world many harmful things put on an inviting guise, which deceives the inexperienced eye. May my child remember that all is not gold that glitters, and desire, not what is diverting merely, but what is useful and . . . and conventional!"

Let us admit that, things being as they are, it is necessary to develop the practical side of the child's nature, to ground him in moral principles, and to make him comprehend and fear — nominally God, but really — society. But why, in addition to doing this, should we strangle the unpractical side of his nature, — the ideal, imaginative, spiritual side, — the side which alone can determine his value or worthlessness in eternity? If our minds were visible as our bodies are, we should behold on every side of us, and in our own private looking-glasses, such abortions, cripples, and monstrosities as all the slums of Europe and the East could not parallel. We pretend to make little men and women out of our children, and we make little dwarfs and hobgoblins out of them. Moreover, we should not diminish even the practical efficiency of the coming generation by rejecting their unpractical side. Whether this boy's worldly destination be to clean a stable or to represent his country at a foreign court, he will do his work all the better, instead of worse, for having been allowed freedom of expansion on the ideal plane. He will do it comprehensively, or as from above downward, instead of blindly, or as from below upward. To a certain extent this position is very generally admitted by instructors nowadays; but the admission bears little or no fruit. The ideality and imagination which they have in mind are but a partial and feeble imitation of what is really signified by those terms. Ideality and imagination are themselves merely the symptom or expression of the faculty and habit of spiritual or subjective intuition — a faculty of paramount value in life, though of late years, in the rush of rational knowledge and discovery, it has fallen into

neglect. But it is by means of this faculty alone that the great religion of India was constructed — the most elaborate and seductive of all systems; and although as a faith Buddhism is also the most treacherous and dangerous attack ever made upon the immortal welfare of mankind, that circumstance certainly does not discredit or invalidate the claim to importance of spiritual intuition itself. It may be objected that spiritual intuition is a vague term. It undoubtedly belongs to an abstruse region of psychology; but its meaning for our present purpose is simply the act of testing questions of the moral consciousness by an inward touch-stone of truth, instead of by external experience or information. That the existence of such a touch-stone should be ridiculed by those who are accustomed to depend for their belief upon palpable or logical evidence, goes without saying; but, on the other hand, there need be no collision or argument on the point, since no question with which intuition is concerned can ever present itself to persons who pin their faith to the other sort of demonstration. The reverse of this statement is by no means true; but it would lead us out of our present path to discuss that matter.

Assuming, however, that intuition is possible, it is evident that it should exist in children in an extremely pure, if not in its most potent state; and to deny it opportunity of development might fairly be called a barbarity. It will hardly be disputed that children are an important element in society. Without them we should lose the memory of our youth, and all opportunity for the exercise of unselfish and disinterested affection. Life would become arid and mechanical to a degree now scarcely conceivable; chastity and all the human virtues would cease to exist; marriage would be an aimless and absurd transaction; and the brotherhood of man, even in the nominal sense that it now exists, would speedily be abjured. Political economy and sociology neglect to make children an element in their arguments and deductions, and no small part of their error is attributable to that circumstance. But although children are still born, and all the world acknowledges their paramount moral and social value, the general tendency of what we are forced to call education at the present day is to shorten as much as possible the period of childhood. In America and Germany especially — but more in America than in Germany — children are urged and stimulated to "grow up" almost before

they have been short-coated. That conceptions of order and discipline should be early instilled into them is proper enough; but no other order and discipline seems to be contemplated by educators than the forcing them to stand and be stuffed full of indigestible and incongruous knowledge, than which proceeding nothing more disorderly could be devised. It looks as if we felt the innocence and naturalness of our children to be a rebuke to us, and wished to do away with it in short order. There is something in the New Testament about offending the little ones, and the preferred alternative thereto; and really we are outraging not only the objective child, but the subjective one also —that in ourselves, namely, which is innocent and pure, and without which we had better not be at all. Now I do not mean to say that the only medicine that can cure this malady is legitimate children's literature; wise parents are also very useful, though not perhaps so generally available. My present contention is that the right sort of literature is an agent of great efficiency, and may be very easily come by. Children derive more genuine enjoyment and profit from a good book than most grown people are susceptible of: they see what is described, and themselves enact and perfect the characters of the story as it goes along.

Nor is it indispensable that literature of the kind required should forthwith be produced; a great deal, of admirable quality, is already on hand. There are a few great poems— Spenser's "Faerie Queene" is one—which no well-regulated child should be without; but poetry in general is not exactly what we want. Children—healthy children—never have the poetic genius; but they are born mystics, and they have the sense of humor. The best way to speak to them is in prose, and the best kind of prose is the symbolic. The hermetic philosophers of the Middle Ages are probably the authors of some of the best children's stories extant. In these tales, disguised beneath what is apparently the simplest and most artless flow of narrative, profound truths are discussed and explained. The child reads the narrative, and certainly cannot be accused of comprehending the hidden philosophical problem; yet that also has its share in charming him. The reason is partly that true symbolic or figurative writing is the simplest form known to literature. The simplest, that is to say, in outward form,—it may be indefinitely abstruse as to its inward contents. Indeed,

the very cause of its formal simplicity is its interior profundity. The principle of hermetic writing was, as we know, to disguise philosophical propositions and results under a form of words which should ostensibly signify some very ordinary and trivial thing. It was a secret language, in the vocabulary of which material facts are used to represent spiritual truths. But it differed from ordinary secret language in this, that not only were the truths represented in the symbols, but the philosophical development of the truth, in its ramifications, was completely evolved under the cover of a logically consistent tale. This, evidently, is a far higher achievement of ingenuity than merely to string together a series of unrelated parts of speech, which, on being tested by the "key," shall discover the message or information really intended. It is, in fact, a practical application of the philosophical discovery, made by or communicated to the hermetic philosophers, that every material object in nature answers to or corresponds with a certain one or group of philosophical truths. Viewed in this light, the science of symbols or of correspondences ceases to be an arbitrary device, susceptible of alteration according to fancy, and avouches itself an essential and consistent relation between the things of the mind and the things of the senses. There is a complete mental creation, answering to the material creation, not continuously evolved from it, but on a different or detached plane. The sun,—to take an example,—the source of light and heat, and thereby of physical nature, is in these fables always the symbol of God, of love and wisdom, by which the spirit of man is created. Light, then, answers to wisdom, and heat to love. And since all physical substances are the result of the combined action of light and heat, we may easily perceive how these hermetic sages were enabled to use every physical object as a cloak of its corresponding philosophical truth,—with no other liability to error than might result from the imperfect condition of their knowledge of physical laws.

To return, however, to the children, I need scarcely remark that the cause of children's taking so kindly to hermetic writing is, that it is actually a living writing; it is alive in precisely the same way that nature, or man himself, is alive. Matter is dead; life organizes and animates it. And all writing is essentially dead which is a mere transcript of fact, and is not inwardly organized and vivified by a spiritual significance. Children do

not know what it is that makes a human being smile, move, and talk; but they know that such a phenomenon is infinitely more interesting than a doll; and they prove it by themselves supplying the doll with speech and motions out of their own minds, so as to make it as much like a real person as possible. In the same way, they do not perceive the philosophical truth which is the cause of existence of the hermetic fable; but they find that fable far more juicy and substantial than the ordinary narrative of every-day facts, because, however fine the surface of the latter may be, it has, after all, nothing but its surface to recommend it. It has no soul; it is not alive; and, though they cannot explain why, they feel the difference between that thin, fixed grimace and the changing smile of the living countenance.

It would scarcely be practicable, however, to confine the children's reading to hermetic literature; for not much of it is extant in its pure state. But it is hardly too much to say that all fairy stories, and derivations from these, trace their descent from an hermetic ancestry. They are often unaware of their genealogy; but the sparks of that primal vitality are in them. The fairy is itself a symbol for the expression of a more complex and abstract idea; but, once having come into existence, and being, not a pure symbol, but a hybrid between the symbol and that for which it stands, it presently began an independent career of its own. The mediæval imagination went to work with it, found it singularly and delightfully plastic to its touch and requirements, and soon made it the center of a new and charming world, in which a whole army of graceful and romantic fancies, which are always in quest of an arena in which to disport themselves before the mind, found abundant accommodation and nourishment. The fairy land of mediæval Christianity seems to us the most satisfactory of all fairy lands, probably because it is more in accord with our genius and prejudices than those of the East; and it fitted in so aptly with the popular mediæval ignorance on the subject of natural phenomena, that it became actually an article of belief with the mass of men, who trembled at it while they invented it, in the most delicious imaginable state of enchanted alarm. All this is prime reading for children; because, though it does not carry an orderly spiritual meaning within it, it is more spiritual than material, and is constructed entirely according to the dictates

of an exuberant and richly colored, but, nevertheless, in its own sphere, legitimate imagination. Indeed, fairy land, though as it were accidentally created, has the same permanent right to be that Beauty has; it agrees with a genuine aspect of human nature, albeit one much discountenanced just at present. The sequel to it, in which romantic human personages are accredited with fairy-like attributes, as in the "Faerie Queene," already alluded to, is a step in the wrong direction, but not a step long enough to carry us altogether outside of the charmed circle. The child's instinct of selection being vast and cordial,—he will make a grain of true imagination suffuse and glorify a whole acre of twaddle,—we may with security leave him in that fantastic society. Moreover, some children being less imaginative than others, and all children being less imaginative in some moods and conditions than at other seasons, the elaborate compositions of Tasso, Cervantes, and the others, though on the boundary line between what is meat for babes and the other sort of meat, have also their abiding use.

The "Arabian Nights" introduced us to the domain of the Oriental imagination, and has done more than all the books of travel in the East to make us acquainted with the Asiatic character and its differences from our own. From what has already been said on the subject of spiritual intuition in relation to these races, one is prepared to find that all the Eastern literature that has any value is hermetic writing, and therefore, in so far, proper for children. But the incorrigible subtlety of the Oriental intellect has vitiated much of their symbology, and the sentiment of sheer wonder is stimulated rather than that of orderly imagination. To read the "Arabian Nights" or the "Bhagavad-Gita" is a sort of dissipation; upon the unhackneyed mind of the child it leaves a reactionary sense of depression. The life which it embodies is distorted, over-colored, and exciting; it has not the serene and balanced power of the Western productions. Moreover, these books were not written with the grave philosophic purpose that animated our own hermetic school; it is rather a sort of jugglery practiced with the subject—an exercise of ingenuity and invention for their own sake. It indicates a lack of the feeling of responsibility on the writers' part,—a result, doubtless, of the prevailing fatalism that underlies all their thought. It is not essentially wholesome, in short; but it is immeasurably superior to the best of the productions called

forth by our modern notions of what should be given to children to read.

But the space at my command compels me to no more than touch upon this branch of the subject; nor will it be possible to linger long over that department of our own literature which came into being with "Robinson Crusoe." No theory as to children's books would be worth much attention which found itself obliged to exclude that memorable work. Although it submits in a certain measure to classification, it is almost *sui generis;* no book of its kind, approaching it in merit, has ever been written. In what, then, does its fascination consist? There is certainly nothing hermetic about it; it is the simplest and most studiously matter-of-fact narrative of events, comprehensible without the slightest effort, and having no meaning that is not apparent on the face of it. And yet children, and grown people also, read it again and again, and cannot find it uninteresting. I think the phenomenon may largely be due to the nature of the subject, which is really of primary and universal interest to mankind. It is the story of the struggle of man with wild and hostile nature,—in the larger sense an elementary theme,—his shifts, his failures, his perils, his fears, his hopes, his successes. The character of Robinson is so artfully generalized or universalized, and sympathy for him is so powerfully aroused and maintained, that the reader, especially the child reader, inevitably identifies himself with him, and feels his emotions and struggles as his own. The ingredient of suspense is never absent from the story, and the absence of any plot prevents us from perceiving its artificiality. It is, in fact, a type of the history of the human race, not on the higher plane, but on the physical one; the history of man's contest with and final victory over physical nature. The very simplicity and obviousness of the details gives them grandeur and comprehensiveness: no part of man's character which his contact with nature can affect or develop is left untried in Robinson. He manifests in little all historical earthly experiences of the race; such is the scheme of the book; and its permanence in literature is due to the sobriety and veracity with which that scheme is carried out. To speak succinctly, it does for the body what the hermetic and cognate literature does for the soul; and for the healthy man, the body is not less important than the soul in

its own place and degree. It is not the work of the Creator, but it is contingent upon creation.

But poor Robinson has been most unfortunate in his progeny, which at this day overrun the whole earth, and render it a worse wilderness than ever was the immortal Crusoe Island. Miss Edgeworth, indeed, might fairly pose as the most persistently malignant of all sources of error in the design of children's literature; but it is to be feared that it was Defoe who first made her aware of the availability of her own venom. She foisted her prim and narrow moral code upon the commonplace adventures of a priggish little boy and his companions; and straightway the whole dreary and disastrous army of sectarians and dogmatists took up the cry, and have been ringing the lugubrious changes on it ever since. There is really no estimating the mortal wrong that has been done to childhood by Maria Edgeworth's "Frank" and "The Parents' Assistant"; and, for my part, I derive a melancholy joy in availing myself of this opportunity to express my sense of my personal share in the injury. I believe that my affection for the human race is as genuine as the average; but I am sure it would have been greater had Miss Edgeworth never been born; and were I to come across any philosophical system whereby I could persuade myself that she belonged to some other order of beings than the human, I should be strongly tempted to embrace that system on that ground alone.

After what has been advanced in the preceding pages, it does not need that I should state how earnestly I deprecate the kind of literary food which we are now furnishing to the coming generation in such sinister abundance. I am sure it is written and published with good and honorable motives; but at the very best it can only do no harm. Moreover, however well-intentioned, it is bad as literature; it is poorly conceived and written, and, what is worse, it is saturated with affectation. For an impression prevails that one needs to talk down to children;—to keep them constantly reminded that they are innocent, ignorant little things, whose consuming wish it is to be good and go to Sunday-school, and who will be all gratitude and docility to whomsoever provides them with the latest fashion of moral sugar-plums; whereas, so far as my experience and information goes, children are the most formidable literary critics in the

world. Matthew Arnold himself has not so sure an instinct for what is sound and good in a book as any intelligent little boy or girl of eight years old. They judge absolutely; they are hampered by no comparisons or relative considerations. They cannot give chapter and verse for their opinion; but about the opinion itself there is no doubt. They have no theories; they judge in a white light. They have no prejudices nor traditions; they come straight from the simple source of life. But, on the other hand, they are readily hocussed and made morbid by improper drugs, and presently, no doubt, lose their appetite for what is wholesome. Now, we cannot hope that an army of hermetic philosophers or Mother-Gooses will arise at need and remedy all abuses; but at least we might refrain from moralizing and instruction, and, if we can do nothing more, confine ourselves to plain stories of adventure, say, with no ulterior object whatever. There still remains the genuine literature of the past to draw upon; but let us beware, as we would of forgery and perjury, of serving it up, as has been done too often, medicated and modified to suit the foolish dogmatism of the moment. Hans Christian Andersen was the last writer of children's stories, properly so called; though, considering how well married to his muse he was, it is a wonder as well as a calamity that he left no descendants.

JULIAN HAWTHORNE.